



THEIR BEST

BY
L. G. MOBERLY

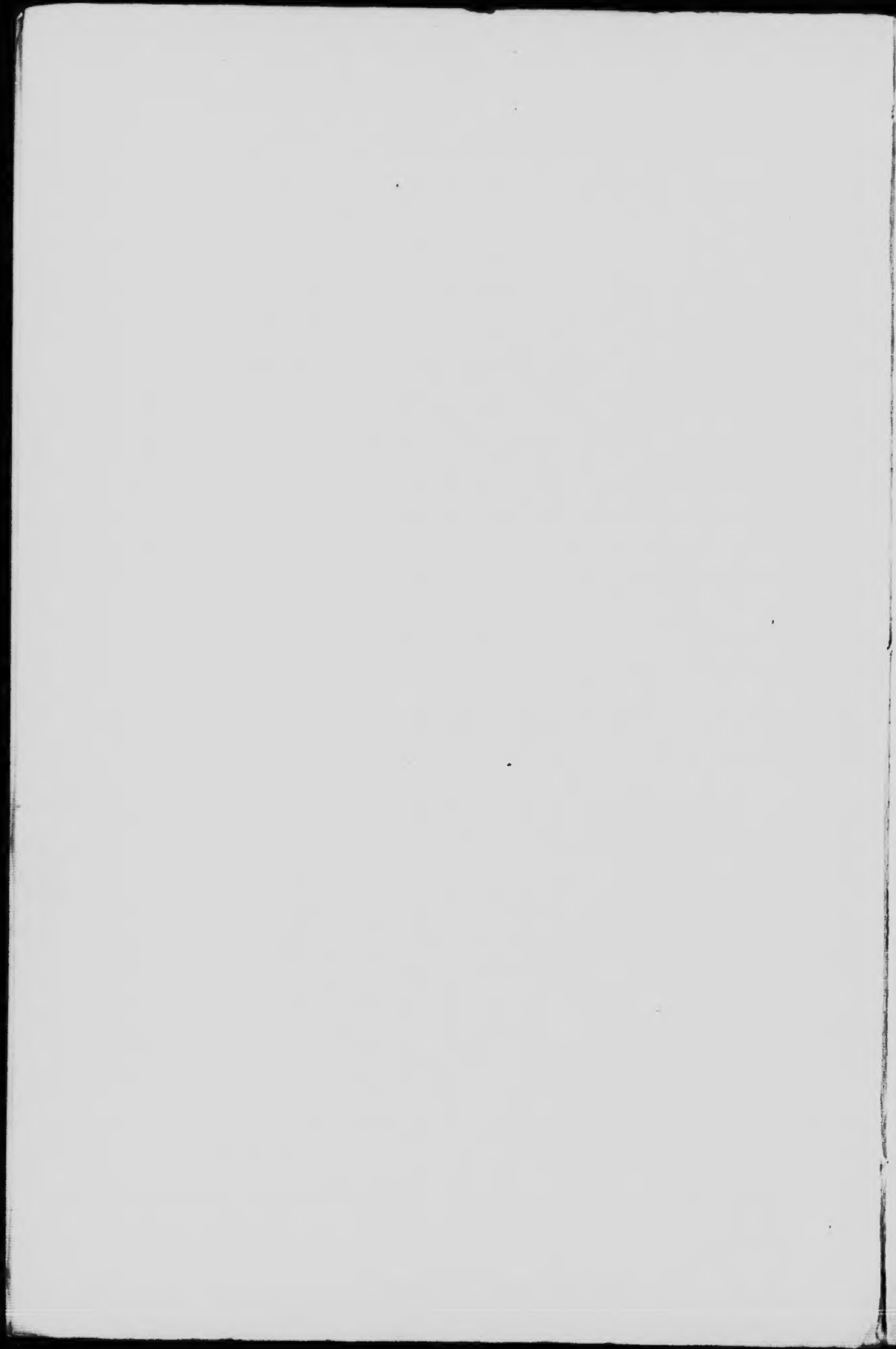


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AT THEIR BEST.

By L. G. MODERLY.

THE hotel bore a strong family likeness to other hotels. There was a big lounge full of big comfy chairs, pots of palm trees and indiarubber plants, writing-tables, and a great sofa or two. There was a nicely upholstered drawing-room into which nobody ever went, and quite the usual kind of dining-room through whose windows you looked out into the trimly-kept garden. And the people staying in the hotel were curiously like other people in other hotels—so I thought, when on my first evening at the Duke Hotel I looked round at my fellow-guests.

Some women were quietly well-dressed; some were gowned ultra fashionably; some were quite nondescript—the sort of people who are so like hundreds of others that you would never recognize them again. And from the conversation that reached me in snatches, as I sat with my book—too new a comer to be spoken to as yet—I gathered that this hotel was not behind others in love of gossip and personalities.

These bits of talk I heard made me inwardly register a vow that I would steer clear of the dark-eyed woman in the red gown—the woman whose hair was so wonderfully dressed, whose laugh held such a mocking ring. Neither did I altogether fancy a small fair lady dressed in diaphanous garments. She spoke in undertones, but her words sometimes reached my ears—they were always remarks about this person or that, and always tinged with spite. There was a good deal of, "Well, I was perfectly sure he . . ." and then the voice would drop to a whisper. Or, "I would have been ready to bet anything you like she . . ." and another drop of the voice.

"Nasty malicious creatures!" I thought, rather bitterly. "I suppose one has to expect this sort of thing in every hotel, even when one comes to a hill-top like this." And my mind went back to my saunter after my arrival, the walk through dim pine woods and over sunlit spaces of leather, where the views of wide landscapes and open horizons seemed to set one above all the pettinesses of human beings. Yet here in the hotel these women were

picking holes in their neighbours with the same gusto and eagerness as is shown by the barn-door fowl picking at grains in the yard.

"*Cats!*" That was my mental exclamation, and at the very moment I thought the word a woman came in from the hall, and for an instant stood on the top step looking down into the lounge. She was slight and small, but she was not young, nor was she in any way strikingly dressed, but there was something about her which arrested my attention. The light of the lamps touched her hair—very white hair, piled softly and loosely upon her head. The light fell, too, upon her face, showing that she was smiling a little. I told myself it was the smile that drew my attention. It had some quality all its own—a serenity, a restfulness, a curious arresting charm.

She paused only for a second on the top step, then came quietly down into the lounge; and as she came I saw that her eyes were blue, and that they held the same qualities as her smile. They gave you a feeling that in the woman herself was an inward peace which no outward fret or trouble could destroy.

All this flashed through my mind whilst she walked across the lounge; and suddenly I became aware that the dark woman in red on my right was no longer talking of her neighbours, but of the sunset over the weald. And I realized in a funny sub-conscious sort of way that the little fair woman had stopped murmuring in undertones about countless he's and she's, and was describing her last winter on the Riviera. And all the while the white-haired woman with the blue, blue eyes was coming quietly across the lounge until she seated herself in an empty chair by my side.

I think I was the only person in the big room not engaged in conversation, and I had felt vaguely a tiny bit lonely and out of it when the newcomer said gently—

"I believe I saw you walking towards my pet wood before dinner. Did you ever see anything much more beautiful than that sea of bracken under the pines?"

She did not talk to me as if we were strangers—we might have known each other for years; and there was a friendliness in her eyes and smile which seemed to indicate that we really were quite old friends. And not only did she give me the sensation of having met a real friend, she gave me the same sort of feeling that is given me by a fresh breeze blowing in from the sea, or over heather uplands. Despite her white hair, there was in her very

personality a vitality, an eager youthfulness, which made me all at once feel more alive. And there emanated from her the same serenity, the same restfulness, the same spirit of inward peace, which looked out of her eyes and shone in her smile.

Presently she turned a little, and included in our conversation the red-gowned woman whose hard eyes, in some unaccountable way, seemed to soften as they looked into the blue eyes of my companion.

"Where is Sylvia Grant to-night?" my new friend asked of the lady of the red gown.

"Oh, my dear Miss Larpent," came the answer, accompanied by a rather contemptuous laugh, "she took herself off this afternoon. She made this place too hot to hold her. Even you, charitable as you are, must ——"

"She is so young, and so very pretty," my blue-eyed lady interrupted gently. "If she were a little bit foolish, too, perhaps it was only natural. After all, one has not completely graduated in wisdom at eighteen."

"I believe she enjoyed breaking hearts," chimed in the small, fair lady on my left; and I noticed almost a vicious ring in her voice. I was convinced that she and the unknown Sylvia had been rivals.

But Miss Larpent turned those blue serene eyes of hers towards the fair, rather fretful face.

"I should never despair even of the Sylvias of this world," she said, and though she spoke quietly, I was struck by a firmness in her voice. "There are fine characteristics in this particular Sylvia, and when the surface froth has blown away, the real good that is underneath will come to the top."

"Is there any real good?" sneered the red-gowned dame. "You are so determined always to see the best in everybody, dear Miss Larpent, and—to ignore anything else. What is the use of pretending people are bits of perfection when they are nothing of the kind?"

"On the other hand, what is the use of picking out only the weak points in a character, and focussing our gaze upon those? I have a notion that the more you dwell upon the thought that your neighbour is a thief, a liar, a generally disreputable person, the more you help him to be all those things. But the more you single out his good qualities and dwell upon *them*, so much the more do you enable him to reach his ideal self."

Her tones had become grave, but she smiled as she looked from one of the ladies to the other; that disarming smile of hers brought answering smiles.

"Don't you think"—she leant forward a little, and I was impressed by the eager youthfulness of her face—"don't you think the only thing to do with our fellow-beings is to take them at their best—to look out all for the best in them? I have an idea—and I don't believe it is altogether a fanciful idea—that the more persistently one digs out the good in everybody, the more the good rises to the surface."

"If there is any good to rise," the lady of the red gown murmured. But there was no longer malice in her tones; she only spoke doubtfully.

"Oh, surely there is always good to rise in everybody, if one only digs deep enough." Miss Larpent's blue eyes shone with a wonderful light. "It is only a matter of going to the right depth." And she laughed a deliciously youthful laugh, which somehow had the effect of making one think of spring and growing things, and the songs of birds, and gladness.

It was an extraordinary thing how the whole atmosphere of that hotel lounge seemed to have changed since the blue-eyed lady came into it. She brought with her an atmosphere of her own, and it spread through the whole place, as a current of fresh air spreads through a stuffy room; and again I was struck, as I had been struck at her first entrance, by the way in which spiteful gossip died away at her coming. Something about her very presence had the effect of checking spitefulness and sharp tongues.

Presently those immediately round us drifted away to their cards or other amusements, and the white-haired lady and I were left practically alone in our corner.

"I wonder you can be patient with such shameless gossips," I said. "Before you came in they were tearing people's reputations to pieces in a most shocking way. They belong to the class of persons who cheerfully does 'others to death with slanderous tongues.'"

For an instant a shadow fell over her serene face. Then she smiled again.

"They have so little to do or to think about excepting their neighbours," she said. "But do you know that in both of them there is a best—quite a big best? The lady in the red gown is more than kind to the over-worked girl in the bureau here. She has given her lots of little treats; she always chats to her pleasantly. And the little fair lady has a small child to whom she is devoted. Her one child makes her feel kindly to all children."

"You must have done a great deal of spade work—

and hard work at that—to dig a satisfactory best out of those two ladies,” I exclaimed, a little maliciously, I am afraid. “And what is the good of troubling so much to look for a best in people? Why not just take them as we find them?”

“Take them at their best, though,” she answered gaily. “Don’t you know the verse I am so fond of:—

“ ‘When your brother man you measure,
Take him at his best;
Something in him you can treasure,
Overlook the rest.’ ”

“See the best in people, make the best of them. Sometimes it is up-hill work, but one just goes on trying. Come out into the garden,” she went on after a pause; “it is so still out there, and the air is so clear. I always feel as if the garden helped to blow away any noxious vapours that hang about the lounge.”

“You yourself help to blow them away,” I thought, as I walked with her through the open window, at the far end of the room, into the garden upon which the moonlight had laid its magic touch. “You have the same effect as this clean, pure air that has blown across the heather and the pines.”

She did not speak herself until we had passed along the garden path between beds where the white lilies stood tall and ghostly in the moonlight, and had reached the low wall which bounded that end of the garden. Then she put out her hands with a comprehensive gesture.

“ ‘For the Love of God is broader.
Than the measure of man’s mind,’ ”

she quoted softly. “Those words often come back to me when I look over that great expanse.”

That great expanse! The words fitted. Beyond the wall the ground broke away gradually in a foreground of sloping woodland and meadow, silvered and mysterious in the flooding moonbeams. And beyond meadow and woodland there spread out a vast plain, soft and misty, stretching out like a sea of silver to the rim of the far horizon.

“Doesn’t it seem impossible, out here in this world of light and of great spaces, to think mean, unkind thoughts of anybody?” my companion said dreamily. “Out here under that great arch of sky, looking over that wide reach of land, doesn’t one realize that in each of us there is an

ideal self, a best that lies underneath all the surface follies and sins—'a soul of goodness in things evil'—even in things evil," she added emphatically; "a soul of goodness which is bound somewhere to show itself."

"You have a wonderful faith in human nature," I said, watching her face, which the moonlight seemed to touch into new beauty and serenity.

"Isn't it the only way to uplift human nature?" she answered almost vehemently. "Unless we have faith in it, unless we are sure—sure—sure that the Divine is there behind and within the human, ready to shine through, we keep human nature on a low level. *Believe in it.* Believe in it all the time. Believe that the Divine is in man behind the human, and that presently the Divine will shine out, as this moonlight shines out over the world. Never lose faith in the humanity which was made in the image of God."

She said no more. We stood side by side looking out over the shining plain, but her very presence made me glad, made me feel I had found a new friend. And when presently we turned to go back to the hotel, her blue eyes turned from the great landscape to my face.

"One can always go on having faith," she said, "when there's a view like this in the world. It makes one realize the poet's words:—

"'And I smiled to think God's greatness lay around our incompleteness,
Round our restlessness His rest.'"

